

HOW NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATES ARE MADE

The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) is an institution of some years standing. The first was written in the fall of 1950. The NIE has received publicity by name and as a result there is a wholly understandable public curiosity as to how this most important finished intelligence document is produced. One would say most important both because of the care, man hours, and the high level consideration that go into their preparation, and the attention they command at the highest policy echelon of the Government.

The Director of Central Intelligence, Mr. John McCone, is the man in last analysis responsible for these documents. The National Security Act of 1947, which sets forth his duties, declares him to be responsible for the preparation of the intelligence for national security and in carrying out this mandate Mr. McCone has a primary role in the preparation of these estimates. This is quite a large order and one in which he is assisted by his own special staff -- the Office of National Estimates (O/NE) of the Central Intelligence Agency -- and the combined intelligence resources of what is referred to in Washington parlance as the Intelligence Community. This community is represented by the intelligence organizations whose chiefs sit as members of the United States Intelligence Board. These are: Department of State, Defense Intelligence

Agency, National Security Agency, the intelligence component of the Atomic Energy Commission, and Federal Bureau of Investigation.

In addition, the intelligence chiefs of the three services, Army, Navy, and Air Force, have observer status on the USIB. In actual practice, their role in the production of NIEs is comparable to that of the regular members; they contribute at each step of the process, including the all-important final one. Furthermore, should their views not coincide with those of the Chairman of USIB, their positions will be presented in the usual footnote of dissent.

National intelligence estimates are constructed for one single purpose, namely to serve the intelligence requirements of those high policy making individuals and groups that formulate national security policy: the President and the members of the National Security Council, and various ad hoc interdepartmental task forces.

The procedure through which national intelligence estimates pass is a procedure designed to make the national intelligence estimate maximally useful to the purpose it is designed to serve. Before getting to the machinery itself let me lay out the four principal desiderata which an estimate ~~must~~ possess.

As a matter of highest importance the national intelligence estimate must incorporate all the truest and most reliable information, the most advanced and careful intelligence research, and the most sophisticated intelligence thinking.

It should be the institution which obligates the totality of national intelligence resources. No one who has not grown up in the trade can have an idea of the size and power of these resources.

Lastly, as a practical matter its findings should be in largest measure possible agreed to by the members (and observers) of USIB. It can do the policy maker little or no good to be presented with an intelligence paper in which areas of disagreement are very large and in which several of the intelligence chiefs have incorporated resounding dissents to matters of key importance to the policy consumer. The net result of such a badly split paper is to oblige the policy maker to resolve the splits -- in other words, to force the policy maker to do the work of intelligence, a task for which he is far less well prepared than intelligence itself.

An estimate must arrive in time to be of use to the users whenever they begin their deliberations on a policy matter. Advance notice of need for an estimate may amount to months, weeks, days, or, in times of crises, only hours.

They must deal with astringently limited subject matter. In the first place they will treat only foreign situations -- never domestic problems. They must limit themselves to those areas of a foreign situation with respect to which policy officials will have a legitimate concern. Within these limits they will confine themselves to the statement of knowable relevant facts which are known with a high degree of accuracy. They will go on to estimate factual situations about which precise knowledge is wanted. The type and number of this kind of estimate is of course largely a function of how well a foreign power is able to protect its own secrets of state. Lastly, they must estimate about things which are literally unknowable.

This phase of estimating proceeds naturally and unavoidably from the very essence of policy planning itself. So long as the policy planner must look into the future in an endeavor to plot the wise course, so must the intelligence estimator try to project himself from the factual situation of today into the speculative areas of tomorrow.

The qualities of an NIE as set forth above should and, in fact, do dictate the procedure which produces them. Depending upon the time available, the procedure will vary. If short, say a matter of hours, the procedure is clipped to its two essential steps -- the writing of the draft and its submission to the Director of Central Intelligence and the members of the United States Intelligence Board for approval. If, on the other hand, circumstances permit, the paper will pass through a routine procedure which may require several months. Let us examine this latter case for it most fully illustrates the care with which the desirable qualities are built into the finished paper.

First, as to timing. Various upper echelon policy makers or policy-making groups, themselves daily consumers of intelligence in its many forms, can sometimes block out their activities for weeks and months in advance. They will know that the policy paper on Ruritania is probably good for another year but that the sweep of events is fast calling for a review of policy towards Bukovenia and Malatacha. They will accordingly set an earlier date for the completion of the review of these two latter policies. This decision is made known to the intelligence community through appropriate channels. The Office of National Estimates in the CIA takes note of the requirement. This organization is the Director's right hand and the memory and executive group for the whole community in the matter of national intelligence estimates. Among

its other duties, the Office of National Estimates tries to anticipate the needs of the policy makers. Once each quarter, the O/NE confers with representatives of the intelligence community and presents to the USIB a schedule of papers to be undertaken for the next six months. Needless to say, this schedule rests squarely on the requirements of the consumer. Such is the mechanism through which most of the NIEs are programmed so as to arrive at destination in ample time to serve whatever use the policy makers desire.

Of course, not all estimates can be laid on in this orderly and far-seeing way. A considerable percentage will always have to be laid on to meet policy emergencies and produced under crash procedures. But the point to bear in mind is that almost no estimates in their long history have been produced too late. The few that have met this dismal fate met it through the most unpredictable of accidents.

One of the classical problems of intelligence work inheres in the separation of intelligence from policy staffs and in the fact that each has its own dark secrets which it feels it may not reveal. Policy people have been known to withhold the reason why they want such-and-such information from an intelligence organization on the ground that to explain fully would unnecessarily risk compromise of an extremely sensitive policy gambit. As long as

would-be policy consumers play their cards thus close to the chest, they deny to intelligence exactly the kind of guidance necessary to make the intelligence contribution most applicable to their problems. Intelligence, on the other hand, having given a highly useful answer to the policy people, may find that it is being regarded skeptically simply because the intelligence brotherhood does not feel able to reveal the source. It is worth mentioning this classical problem to the lay audience of this article in order to indicate that never before in our history has this problem been less important than in the area of national intelligence estimates. Intelligence is sufficiently in the confidence of the policy people to know the exact requirement and the why of it, and the policy people sufficiently in the confidence of intelligence to permit intelligence to validate its findings when necessary by reference to source or method of collection. Accordingly, the step in the production of estimates calculated to make the product applicable to consumer wants is a relatively simple one. It is known in the trade as the "Terms of Reference" stage.

Most estimates begin with a document called the Terms of Reference." These are drafted in the Office of National Estimates, are discussed when necessary with potential users, are discussed by representatives of the intelligence community, and become the cornerstone of the structure to be built.

The terms of reference paper usually looks like a comprehensive examination paper for a student who has spent four years studying the past, present, and probable future of Ruritania. The questions call for analyses of those parts of Ruritanian history and present existence as well as for reasoned guesses on probable future developments that the policy maker will want to hear about. As a general proposition there will be far more questions on the economy and military establishment and political problems than on the Ruritanian family life and prospects at the forthcoming Olympic games. An NIE is not an encyclopedia. It is a thin document of pertinent facts and estimates, and the terms of reference discussions are the means by which this is achieved.

The terms of reference serve another purpose. They are the first step in the business of seeing to it that the totality of national intelligence resources are focussed on the problem at hand. This step is the mechanism through which members of the intelligence community are authorized to return to their respective research organizations and to instruct appropriate intelligence

Approved For Release 2005/04/13 : CIA-RDP79R00971A000100060002-8

research staffs to pull together all of their materials on such-and-such a subject. No one member of the intelligence community undertakes as a matter of primary obligation to do the research called for by all of the entries of the terms of reference. Normally, a very simple breakdown of responsibility is followed: the State Department's intelligence arm produces answers to the political and economic questions; the military intelligence organizations the answers to the military questions; the AEC and FBI, answers to the questions which lie within their responsibilities. Certain specialized components of the CIA themselves may undertake studies of important parts of the terms of reference.

The terms of reference session is conducted in the Office of National Estimates, is chaired by a member of the Board of National Estimates (a senior group of substantive advisors to the Director of Central Intelligence), and attended by representatives of the intelligence community. At this meeting not only are the matters noted above discussed, but responsibilities fixed for contributions and a deadline set.

The next step in the process takes place within the several intelligence research organizations and estimates groups of the contributing intelligence agencies. The State Department man will return to his Ruritanian section chief. He may also alert other specialists in his organization who keep the files on international

organizations and international trade; perhaps his population or transportation specialist. To each he will set a task of writing him copy on the basis of what each has in his head, in his safe, or knows to be available elsewhere within reach. Ruritanian staff experts may be dispatched to the Library of Congress, the Department of Commerce, a museum, a university library, or a professor in a learned institution. He may wire the embassy in Ruritania's capital city, see to it that a half dozen American businessmen recently returned from a Ruritanian trip are interviewed, request a careful screening of the preceding year's broadcasts from Radio Ruritania, get out the back files of the Ruritanian Times and the Ruritanian Economic Monthly. If necessary, another intelligence component will be asked to screen and translate appropriate articles from a half dozen Ruritanian and other journals.

The Army man will return to his organization with a similar mission. He will levy upon his own Order of Battle Section, his Weapons Section, and so on. He may wire his attaches in Ruritania and nearby countries for up-to-date information on a score of matters.

And so with the Navy and Air members; and so with appropriate components of the Central Intelligence Agency itself.

In the Office of National Estimates the staff will begin blocking out the paper, discussing the key estimates with members

of the Board of National Estimates against the time when the written contributions from the agencies will arrive and the formal draft got under way.

On the appointed day the contributions arrive and the staff of the Office of National Estimates begin their study and digestion. The paper is drafted and discussed with the Board of National Estimates. At this stage of the procedure some problems of great importance may appear. For example, it may become obvious that there is comparatively little information on some very important matters. It may appear that on other important matters there are very wide differences of opinion between two or three or more of the contributing agencies. It is up to the Office of National Estimates to try to fill the gaps in information through calling on any intelligence resources it can name and to resolve the fundamental differences, at least to its own satisfaction. It will call upon the resources of the Central Intelligence Agency for help and it may arrange for informal briefings by the experts of the outside agencies in question. Its task is to see that the paper is as complete as may be and that a position is taken with respect to the matters at contest. This position is the position which the Board of National Estimates feels that the Director of Central Intelligence should take.

The draft estimate is dispatched back to the intelligence community. There in the member agencies it is studied and checked

with the various experts. Within a week or two representatives of each of the member agencies meet with the Board of National Estimates to begin the next-to-the-last stage of the process. This is the stage known in governmentese as "coordination." The meeting is presided over by the member of the Board of National Estimates who has ridden hard on the paper from the beginning. The meetings consist of going over the text word by word and paragraph by paragraph; setting the text right where errors of fact have been made; correcting matters of color or emphasis and trying to reach agreement on the key estimates. If the wide differences of opinion persist which appeared with the written contributions, there will be discussions in the presence of experts. There will be formal briefings by expert staffs. Representatives will take the problem to their chiefs, discuss them at length with the chief and with his other expert witnesses. When meetings resume, if there is no resolution of the conflict, dissenters are invited to reserve on the paragraph and to compose footnotes of dissent. At the end of the coordinating process which, in short papers may take no more than an afternoon, and in the case of long and difficult papers a score or more of day-long sessions, there emerges a draft estimate. It represents a systematic ransacking of the storehouses of knowledge and the work of hundreds of minds, perhaps thousands, using scores of methods and techniques -- some

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as old as time; some seemingly from the lexicon and Buck Rogers.
It may be, however, that there are still dissents.

The final stage in estimate making occurs at the weekly meeting of the United States Intelligence Board where the estimate receives its own full and proper treatment by the intelligence chiefs themselves. If there are still dissenting opinions, they are discussed in full and in the event of no resolution, the dissenter commits his objections to a footnote of dissent. If all has gone well, the policy maker gets his paper on time. It has been cut to the exact dimensions of his requirements; it can be said to represent the best collective effort of the intelligence community, agreed to by all or very nearly all the intelligence chiefs of the government.

How is one to account for dissents when everybody involved works from the same inventory of information? The point is that there are never dissents with respect to the knowable things that are in fact known and there are seldom dissents with respect to knowable things that do not happen to be known with exactness. Dissents almost invariably arise with respect to estimates of those things which are literally unknowable. In this case it is all too obvious that no two men need make identical extrapolations. Any two men may find it reasonably easy to agree on

the nature of the past and the nature of the present and make widely divergent estimates as to what the future holds. The reason for dissents is not much more complicated than that which makes horseracing an interesting sport.

Upon occasions it has been said that the process by which national intelligence estimates are written is a process dominated by compromise and that the resultant is a dull gray document full of platitudes. To be sure, unimportant differences of opinion are often compromised, words or phrases offensive to one party are sometimes stricken in the interests of getting on with the job, but the simple fact that these compromises are made is witness to their relative unimportance. By the same token, crucial issues are seldom, if ever, compromised. Disagreements about them are the stuff dissents are made of.